DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 554 EC 110 257

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TITLE	Mainstreaming: Ethnography of the Emerging Role of Special Education Teachers.
PUB DATE	Mar 78
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March, 1978)
AVAILABLE FROM	Center for Learning and Developmental Research in Education, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas 78285 ($0.60 each; $0.50, 10 or more)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; Exceptional Child Research; *Handicapped Children; *Mainstreaming; Observation; *Special Education Teachers; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Utilizing observational field research methodology, two special education teachers were observed daily for a year. Observations were analyzed to describe the teachers' role in the school system. Analysis suggested that issues such as system norms and teacher's creditability were important to effectiveness of mainstreaming. Sensitiveness to teacher's norms and ability to incorporate these norms into the special education teacher's behavior were important in implementing mainstreaming. A norm related to supporting role for special education teachers was hypothesized. It was also hypothesized that the observers collecting data had a supporting effect on teacher's behavior. (Author)

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Mainstreaming: Ethnography of the Emerging Role of Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

Utilizing observational field research methodology, two special education teachers were observed daily for a year. These observations were analyzed to describe the teachers' role in the school social system. Analysis suggested that issues such as system norms and teacher's creditability were important to effectiveness of "mainstreaming." Sensitiveness to teacher's norms and ability to incorporate these norms into the special education teacher's behavior were important in implementing mainstreaming. A norm related to supporting role for special education teachers was hypothesized. It was also hypothesized that the observers collecting data had a supporting effect on teacher's behavior.

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Prepared for presentation to the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; March 27-31, 1978. Session #11.18/Issues in the Education of Handicapped Children.

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Mainstreaming: Ethnography of the Emerging Role of Special Education Teachers

Elwood B. Traylor
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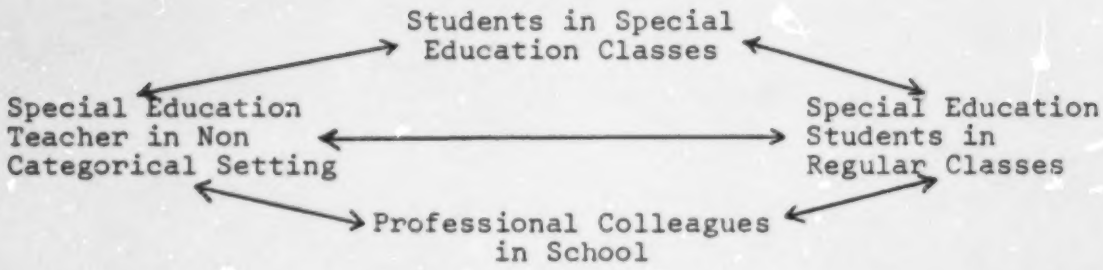
The main objective of this study was to examine and describe the role of the special education teacher. The primary focus was on the emerging character of that role as the organization of special education classes and the context within which the services provided are changing.

Conceptual and Contextual Orientation

Traditionally children in special education classes were assigned on the basis of specific handicapping conditions. Teachers were prepared and certified to teach children with specific handicaps. The grouping of children and teachers was fulfilled in a classroom that was essentially self-contained. The special education teacher had primary, and often exclusive, responsibility for the education and training of the students in the class. Special education was by "category."

Special education classes of a "non categorical" nature are emerging. With labels such as "resource" classes these new approaches to organization and structure of special education threaten to make the "categorical" approach obsolete. Many assumptions, implicit and explicit, are incorporated into these programs. Characteristically children with a variety of diagnosed handicaps are assigned to regular as well as "resource" classes (mainstreaming.) Often the special education teacher is a "helping" teacher in the professional contacts with the teachers of the regular classes, specifically in the planning for instruction of the children from the "resource" class. Traditional self contained orientations are replaced both for students and teachers.

It was this "non categorical" educational context, including the "mainstreaming" of special education students, that was studied. The specific focus was on the role of the special education teacher. Two main strands were examined: the instructional or "in class" behavior of the special education teacher (the direct teacher-student relationship) and the "helping" or collegial behavior of the special education teacher (other teacher and staff relationships.) These strands were described as they related to the behavior of the students in their "non categorical" or resource classes and "regular" classes and to the nature of the professional interaction with other professional staff. Schematically the study examined the following:


Students in Special Education Classes
Special Education Teacher in Non Categorical Setting
Special Education Students in Regular Classes
Professional Colleagues in School

The nature of special education teacher-regular classroom teacher interaction was considered within the broader conceptual orientation of the school and faculty social systems. As one would expect there were differential effects in contacts with different teachers and personnel. Explanation for the meaning of these differences rested in concepts such as social rank, role, norms, and sentiment.

Important to the decisions related to educational practices in a given school is the nature of administrative involvement. Since the "mainstreaming" phenomenon takes place within the broader context of the total school operation, efforts were made to include administrative involvement.

Methodological Framework

Theoretically, the work in role theory by Gross, Explorations in Role Analysis, the social systems positions of Homans, The Human Group, and of Parsons' Social Systems are important. Glaser and Strauss' The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitiative Research, Smith's "Micro-ethnography of the Classroom" and Smith and Pohland's "CAI Fieldwork Methodology: Grounded Theory and Educational Ethnography" provided the orientation for the collection and analysis of data.

The general design followed the standard participant observation field study procedures as these have been described in W. F. Whytes' "Observational Field Work Methods" in Johoda, Deutsch, and Cooks' Research Methods in Social Relations; S. Kimball's "The Method of Natural History and Educational Research" in Spindler's Education and Anthropology; and H. Becker's "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation," in the American Sociological Review, 1958.

In terms of specific design, field note records of school and classroom events were analyzed according to Becker's specific suggestions: 1) selection and definition of problems, concepts, and indices; 2) checking the frequency and distribution of phenomena; 3) construction of social system models; 4) final analysis and presentation of results.

Procedures

Data were collected from the classrooms of two special education teachers. The classrooms were in two different elementary schools in the same school district. One half day, every day, was spent in each observational setting for the duration of the school year. The two investigators served as observers, alternating weeks between schools. Records of the observation were made during the class visits. These records constituted the field notes, which, when coupled with taped interviews, were the primary sources for describing the classroom social system.

The two teachers observed were experienced teachers and certified in special education. One had a masters degree and the other completed master degree requirements during the data-collection period. Both teachers had been interviewed the preceding year and had tentatively agreed to participate in the study contingent upon the proper administrative approvals. Agreement from the superintendent, the special education coordinator, and the principals of each of the schools was obtained prior to initiating the class visits. The investigators were identified to the faculty and students, informally, as researchers from the university.

The teachers frequently added personal comments and anecdotes related to their work and the school. These comments often took the form of tentative plans, reasons for practices, clarification, and occasionally hopes and/or aspirations.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to carefully describe the role of the special education teacher in an educational social system (setting) in transition (the special education students are moving from self contained classrooms to "mainstreaming.") Identifying and understanding the nature of the activities, interaction, and norms of the special education teachers in this setting should be useful to those interested and responsible for training such teachers. In addition, the description resulted in hypotheses for future verification studies.

Results

After spending the year sitting in two special education classrooms, observing and recording the flow of events, the observers collected a substantial amount of data for analysis. Very early in the data collection period predictable patterns of behavior began to emerge. One such pattern was the deliberate attempt of both special education teachers to have almost daily contact with the teachers who had

referred students to the resource rooms. In one setting, the special education teacher utilized the teacher's lounge for a daily contact with her colleagues of regular classrooms. Over a cup of coffee, the special education teacher discussed grading, checked on regular classroom performance of her children, adjusted schedules, advised the teacher or inquired about her concerns for the youngster. A great deal of "business" was conducted during those pre-school tete e tetes. This pattern was consistent throughout the period of observation. On rare occasions when there were no regular classroom teachers present in the lounge, the professional "cloak" role was dropped and and the special teachers conversed among themselves on more light and personal topics.

In the other observational setting a pattern of contacts with regular teachers also developed. This particular special education teacher did not frequent the lounge. She made her contacts by personally stopping at the teachers' classrooms or scheduling time with the teachers at the end of the day.

The data suggest that through "mainstreaming" the emerging role of the special education teacher involves a whole new set of skills. Specifically, she must have or develop the ability to effectively coordinate her program with any number of regular classroom teachers each having his or her perception of the special education teacher's role, methods of teaching, and individual personality. As one of the observed teachers put it, "I have to put up with 20 individual teachers' personalities besides meeting the needs of the children whom I teach." A regular classroom teacher's main concern can be directed toward her children, while the emerging role of special education teachers involves coping with many children and many adult personalities on a frequent basis.

The effective coordination of her program involved a very delicate balance between the needs of the child, the special education teacher, and the classroom teacher. The data suggested that for this delicate balance to be achieved, the special education teacher had to develop a sensitivity to the regular classroom teacher's norms for professional behavior. She had to be sensitive to the regular classroom teacher's perceptions of a special education teacher's role, i.e. what was expected of her.

Insert figure 1 about here

At the same time her game plan had to be sensitive to the child's needs and her goals for the particular child. An example of the required sensitivities of the special education teacher follows: The child came in for his daily lesson with the special education

teacher. He brought with him a spelling workbook which his regular classroom teacher wanted him to work in during the time he spent with the special education teacher. The special education teacher quietly went on with her planned lesson. While the child was working independently at one point, she wrote a note to the teacher explaining that she felt the child was not ready for the workbook page as it was written and related how she had revised it to fit the child's abilities. The special education teacher then taught the revised assignment before the child returned to the classroom. Upon inquiry she explained to the observer that she often had to "readjust" her plans to incorporate the teachers' desires but that she did so with the childrens' abilities and needs in mind. This was required for the delicate balance of the system to be maintained, and for the efficient implementation of the mainstreaming program.

In conjunction with a sensitivity of the special education teacher to the regular classroom teachers' norms for professional behavior, the data suggested the need for careful explanation of the special education program to regular classroom teachers. The contacts with teachers often involved topics such as "this is what I'm doing with Johnny, and this is why I'm doing it." It appeared that both the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher needed to be aware of the "what and why" for a particular youngster if an effective mainstreaming program was to be coordinated. More effective coordination resulted when explanation and justification for educational activities was communicated by the special education teacher. In the communication process, a better working relationship was usually established and maintained. This may have been attributed to the fact that in being aware of the special education teacher's activities and educational plans for the child, the regular classroom teacher was also brought to the realization that the special education teacher was not "goofing off," so to speak. Her creditability was increased as the regular classroom teacher saw the pattern of educational experiences that was planned for the child while he was under the auspices of the special education teacher.

Insert figure 2 about here

The special education teacher, while having the opportunity to work with small groups of children and in a rather self-constructed schedule, was not frittering away the time. The role involved careful and often tedious individualized planning and the carrying out of these plans. As this understanding was gained by the classroom teacher, the relationship with the teacher improved and resulted in a more effective mainstreaming program.

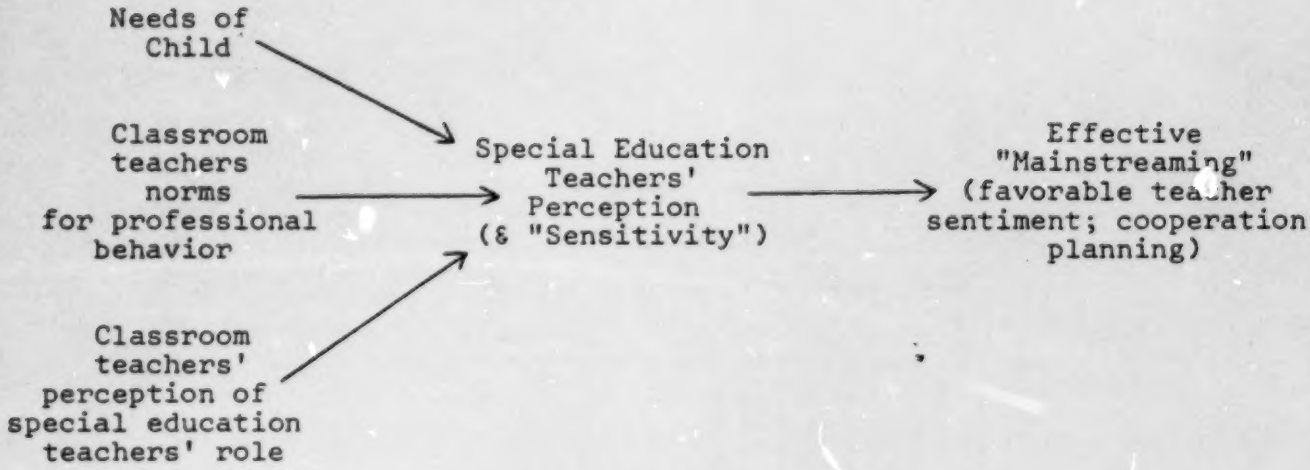

Needs of Child
Classroom teachers norms for professional behavior
Classroom teachers' perception of special education teachers' role
Special Education Teachers' Perception (& "Sensitivity")
Effective "Mainstreaming" (favorable teacher sentiment; cooperation planning)

Figure 1. Variables related to effective mainstreaming.

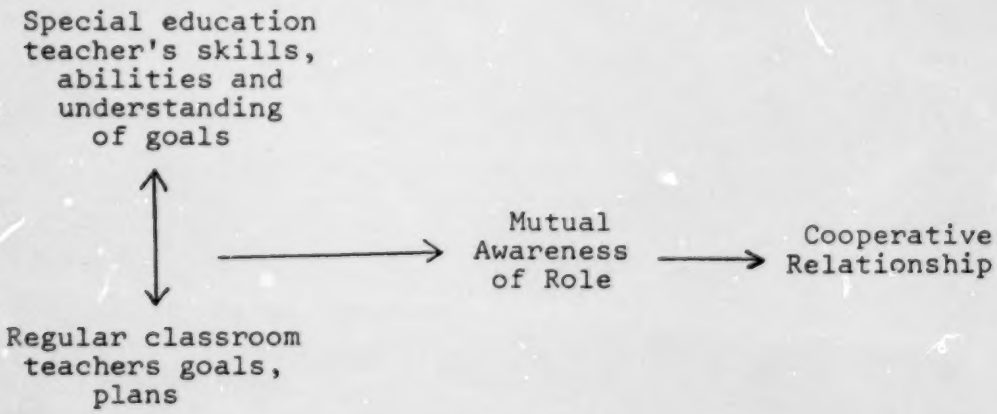

Special education teacher's skills, abilities and understanding of goals
Regular classroom teachers goals, plans
Mutual Awareness of Role
Cooperative Relationship

Figure 2. Cooperative relationships related to clarification of goals and purposes.

The data suggested that the creditability of the special education teacher in the eyes of the regular classroom teacher was related to two factors.

Insert figure 3 about here

One, that the special education teacher had a body of knowledge or expertise that would contribute to the learning of the child. This body of knowledge was conveyed to the classroom teacher in a variety of ways. It was, of course, apparent in the educational plans that were set forth for the child. This yields further support for the "this is what I'm doing and why" sessions. Quite often the expertise of the special education teacher was relayed to the regular classroom teacher through solutions to specific problems he or she was having in the classroom. In directing the classroom teacher to particular methods or materials that she had found to be successful, her creditability was increased. Also, as the child's classroom performance improved in the area of resource help, the special education teacher's expertise was apparent and creditability was increased.

The second factor relating to creditability was the belief that the special education teacher was not violating the territorial rights of the classroom teacher.

Insert figure 4 about here

There were particular "ground rules" established by the regular classroom teacher, and if ignored by the special education teacher the nature of "mainstreaming" would be effected, probably jeopardized. The "ground rules" varied from teacher to teacher but most could be categorized into the areas of scheduling, materials, grading responsibilities and/or equivalence of grading, and limitation of additional time and effort that the special education teacher required of the regular classroom teacher.

The issue of scheduling was an element that was worked through very early in the year, but it is suggested that it can have a major impact on the effectiveness of the mainstreaming program. It is through the scheduling period that relationships between regular classroom teacher and special education teacher are first established. Sensitivity on the part of the special education teacher again came

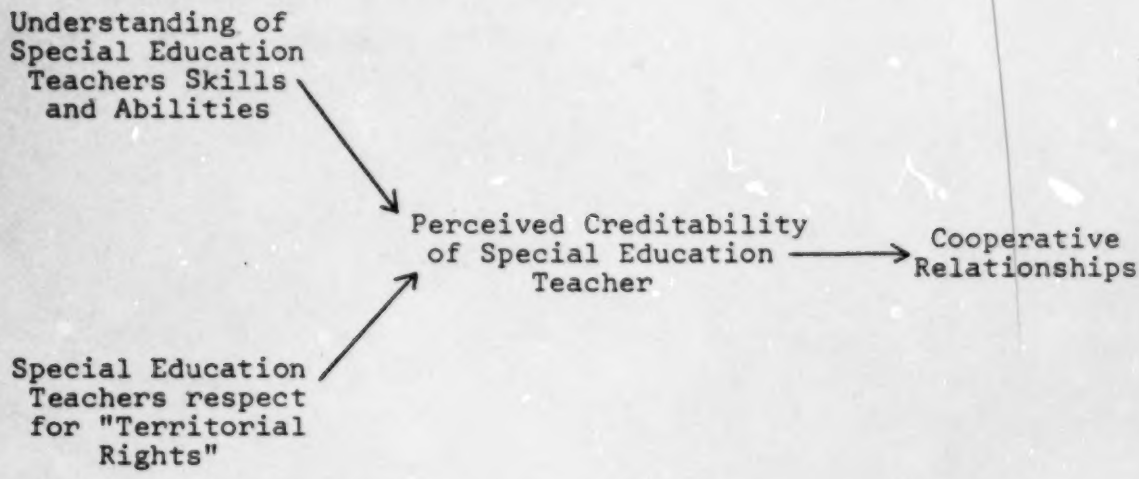

Understanding of Special Education Teachers Skills and Abilities
Perceived Creditability of Special Education Teacher
Cooperative Relationships
Special Education Teachers respect for "Territorial Rights"

Figure 3. Factors related to special education teachers creditability.

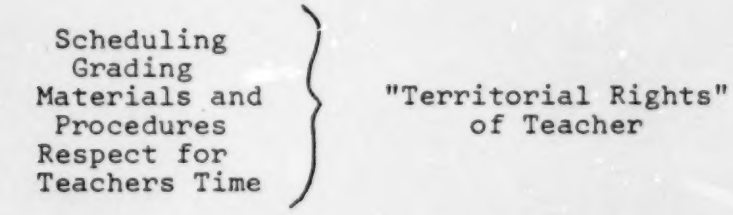


Figure 4. Factors included in teacher's perception of "Territorial Rights"

into play. The special education teacher must be aware of each teacher's "ground rules" dealing with the amount and specific times the child can be released to the resource room for the sake of all concerned, it is paramount that the flow of the child in and out of the resource room go smoothly and without major disruption to the continuity of his regular classroom experiences.

The issue of territorial rights also included the category of materials. Regular classroom teachers often had specific do's and don'ts about what should be utilized in terms of materials while the child was under the special education teacher's tutelage. Open communication between both teachers appeared to be the key to success in this area. Suggestions of the regular classroom teachers were honored when possible and alterations were made when necessary.

The responsibility of grading the children also had to be dealt with in the emerging role of the special education teacher. Issues of concern were: who would be responsible for grading the child who is seen by a regular classroom teacher and resource teacher in the same subject area? Should grading in the special education classroom and the regular classroom be equated? What happens when the two teachers don't rate the child's abilities equally? These issues had to be addressed, resolved, and clearly understood by all teachers involved in the mainstreaming program.

There were territorial rights involved in the area of extra time and effort required of the regular classroom teacher by the special education teacher. During the observation period one instance of overstepping this boundary occurred. As part of her schedule, the special education teacher spent time assisting children while they were in their regular classroom(s). The special education teacher has assumed the researchers could continue to observe when she worked in other teacher's classrooms. After one day of observation in one of the regular classes it became apparent this assumption was incorrect. To observe in the "regular" class was the "right" to be granted by the regular teacher. No further observations were recorded in that teacher's room.

The teachers' confidence in their abilities influenced their relationship with their colleagues. (In both the observational settings the self-fulfilling prophecy seemed to be apparent.) Both teachers had confidence in their abilities and as they perceived themselves as doing a good job, so did their colleagues and supervisors. It was interesting to note that in the course of the final interview with one of the teachers she related that her confidence in herself had increased a great deal as compared to the first year that she had held the special education position. She also stated that as her confidence increased, her ability to communicate "raison d'etre" and/or express herself improved.

The special education teacher's formal education appeared to have impact on her performance in the role and relationships with her colleagues. Several areas were suggested in the data to be useful to the special education teacher. Specifically, skills and understanding in measurement and testing (i.e. diagnostic testing); knowledge of and familiarization with methods, techniques, and materials to be used with learning disabled children; theoretical and conceptual understandings related to methods, tools, etc., (i.e., learning theory); and theoretical and conceptual understandings related to effective interpersonal relations (working with teachers, administrators, parents, etc.)

Also emerging in the analysis of the data was the possibility that the research methodology utilized in the study (investigators observing in classrooms for sustained periods of time) influenced the behavior of the special education teacher.* The analysis suggested that if the observer was perceived to an evaluator enough stress was present to lead the immediate effects of personal discomfort and more careful planning and preparation for the class.

The presence of the observer also supported the ideal professional behavior of the special education teacher. She was more patient with the children,used what she perceived as being more appropriate techniques and methods. At the same time, any non-professional behavior such as aversive techniques of controlling behavior were inhibited while the observer was present.

While the symptoms of personal discomfort dissipated after the first few weeks of observation the data suggested that the support for planning and professional behavior continued throughout the length of the project. Non-professional behavior continued to be inhibited during the period of observation. It is hypothesized that the stress presented by the observers, which supported the teacher's professional behavior and careful planning had the potential for increased learning.

Summary

To review the data it can be said that the emerging role of the special education teacher was one of support to the regular classroom teacher. The educational experiences planned for the child while in the resource room reinforced his regular classroom learning. As the special education teacher performed the role of "helping teacher" in assisting in the planning for children's learning while they participated in the regular classroom she again yielded support. In the

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*A paper elaborating this issue is available.
Traylor and Schoff, "The Question of Affect and Effect: Observer Effects on Observed Behavior"

practice of advisor and counselor in attempting to solve the day to day problems of her colleagues she was placed in a supportive role. It is hypothesized that relations with regular classroom teachers were contingent upon the regular classroom teacher's perception that the special education teacher utilized her time wisely. The ability of the special education teacher to explain and coordinate the program with the regular classroom teacher's program also appeared to influence the relationship between teachers. The creditability of the special education teacher as perceived by the regular classroom teacher was related to the belief that the special education teacher a) had the expertise that would contribute to the learning of the student and b) was not violating their territorial rights.

Conclusion and Implications

The implications for this study seem to be of two types. The first has to do with research methodological issues. The second has to do with training procedures of special education teachers. Several hypotheses were set forth concerning the relations of special education teachers to regular classroom teachers. Additional verification of these hypotheses is needed. If the effects noted are supported, there are implications for the professional training of special education teachers. Planning professional education programs addressing the identified relationships should contribute to more effective professionals.

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